MUNICIPAL REFERENCE LIBRARIES

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The importance of efficient municipal government is more generally recognized today than at any previous time in our history. The citizen realizes as never before what inefficiency and poor laws really cost the community. Some of this cost is due to vicious or incompetent officials, but by far the greater cost can be laid to ignorance, both on the part of the citizens and the officials. Something more than honesty and sincerity is needed to make our municipal government what it should be; something more than the arousing of the public to take an interest in municipal affairs, and this something is knowledge and light. It does not suffice to point out an abuse, though this is essential; but it is necessary to provide a remedy. There are always those who have remedies ready-made for every abuse or imagined abuse that exists in the body politic, but these remedies are not always sound and practical. I do not believe I am overstating it when I say that almost the entire lack of interest which the ordinary citizen takes in municipal government and the apparent indifference with which he regards the so-called reform movements is due to the fact that so frequently the measures proposed have not remedied the abuses, or that the reform programs have not been carried out. Had those who fought the abuses been provided with definite knowledge and accurate data from other municipalities in regard to the same subjects, the results might have been different.

Something more than Honesty and Sincerity

If the city does not at present, it ultimately will, exceed the state in importance. At present almost thirty-five per cent of

the people of the United States reside in cities of over 8000 inhabitants. In a few decades, over one-half of the people will reside in cities. It would seem to follow as a necessary result that the problems of self-government are fast becoming the problems of city government. The present tendency, a tendency which all municipal students heartily support, is to grant more and more home rule to the cities. Some one has remarked that it will not be long until there will be practically only two classes of law-making bodies—the city council and the national congress. Whether this belief be accepted or not, it is unquestionably true that the municipalities are coming to occupy a greater and more important position in the affairs of the country.

The great industrial and social problems of the country are almost entirely confined to the cities, and they must be worked out there, if worked out at all. Mayor Brand Whitlock has aptly and truly said in a recent article that on their solution depended not only the future of the city people, but of the great mass of people who dwell without the city. The city is to be the battle-ground of the future, and democracy, if it is to be justified as we believe it will be, will be justified by the dense, compact populations of the cities.

City Problems the Great Problems

As remarked by Dr. Charles McCarthy, of the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Department, in his paper prepared for the recent meeting of the American Library Association, at the request of the National Municipal League, we hear much about the national and state governments and of the men who are working out the problems which confront the United States and the states, but one has only to stop and think to realize that the great problems are the problems of the cities, and it is here that the great problems of the future are to be fought out. When the people fully realize how much depends upon the character of the municipal government, when the time comes that they have information on which to base sound opinions, there will be a betterment all along the line. The things which most vitally affect every one who resides in the city are those things which are provided by the city government itself, and not by the federal or state governments.

Our water supply, sewerage disposal, milk inspection, light,

transportation, sanitary conditions, fire and police protection, schools and many other things are dependent almost entirely upon the municipal government. Where the nation or state touches us once the city touches us a hundred times. Whether we have good, cheap transportation, telephone and light service, whether our water and milk supply is pure, whether there is adequate fire and police protection, whether we live amid sanitary surroundings, whether we have crowded tenements, whether we have playgrounds and parks, whether we have good schools, and whether we have the best of all the other things which pertain to city life, depends upon the efficiency or inefficiency of the municipal government, and not upon the state or national governments.

The welfare of the entire community, and especially of the laboring class, depends upon good business administration in our cities. If incompetency or viciousness prevail, if the public revenue is squandered or ill spent, then the community suffers in the way of higher taxes, bad service, or unsanitary conditions. If the water or milk supply is impure, then the people pay a terrible toll in the way of infant mortality and epidemics. The same holds true in regard to every question or condition which affects city life, and no argument is necessary to demonstrate the need of using every instrument possible in order to secure a wise and efficient municipal administration.

I am not here to propose a remedy which will be a panacea for all the evils and abuses which exist in municipal government today, but I am here to speak briefly of one of the instruments or agencies whereby our municipal government may become more business-like and more efficient. That agency is the municipal or legislative reference library. It is not a new thing for it has been tried successfully in connection with the legislatures of some of our states. If it is of value to the legislature of how much greater value ought it to be to the municipal government. The problems of the municipal government are becoming more complex and more difficult as the years go by, and it is too much to expect that every city official shall be prepared to meet successfully these problems as they arise.

It is practically impossible for any legislator, however ener-

getic and industrious, however anxious he may be to give his city the best possible government and keep it thoroughly abreast, to collect all the data on questions which come before him and to grasp all the facts relating to the complex conditions of modern legislation. Much study has been given to city government and city conditions and many experiments have been made. Several organizations, notably the National Municipal League, have devoted themselves to the study of municipal problems with the view of bringing about a betterment in present methods of administration. With few exceptions, however, there has been no determined effort to collect, compile and index this material for the use of those who have charge of the administration of our city government. It seems more essential that those who administer the affairs of the city should have at hand such material and data as would aid them in their work than for an industrial organization to have such data for its use. It is a well known fact that these great industrial and commercial organizations have experts employed to make experiments and to gather data which will result in the most economic and efficient management of their particular industries. Why should the city be less progressive?

Difficulties of Legislators

We have, then, first, a great increase in the complexity of social and economic conditions, of legislative and administrative problems; and secondly, a great many students who are making a careful study of the problems which arise as well as the great number of experiments which are being tried by the different cities, but the means have not been provided for making the results of these studies and experiments of practical use. It is to solve this problem—to bring the results of the experiences of other cities into such form as to be easily accessible to city officials, that is offered by the establishment of the municipal reference library.

Complexity

Such a library should not only be a storehouse for the knowledge of the past, but, if it is to accomplish its greater work, it should have on hand the experiences of other cities, so that there would be no need to spend the public money in unwise or

needless experiments. Probably every one here knows of instances where street paving, garbage disposal gas or electric lighting, and many other improvements have proved utter failures. Some years ago the Denver street railway company discovered the economy of electric motive power and prepared to abandon the cable before using it on certain extensions. It was after this had taken place that a cable railway was laid in Baltimore. It is no doubt necessary that experiments be made, for progress requires this, but why should every city undergo the same experience? The simple fact is that we are either unable or unwilling to be guided by the experiences of other cities or we do not know of them, and I believe it is almost entirely due to ignorance of what other cities have done.

The Necessity for Information

There is always some cause for every ordinance. Some one wants to make certain regulations to improve, as he thinks, certain conditions which would tend to the preservation of life, health, comfort, safety, or happiness. If it is a good ordinance, properly administered, it will have that result, but it may bring about the reverse, in which case we will have unsanitary conditions, ill spent moneys, death and misery. With data giving the experiences of other communities, the ordinance could be so framed as to avoid the mistakes or to use to advantage the good features discovered by these experiences.

Every city has its problem of securing good, pure milk. What does it cost the community if there is a poor ordinance or if a good ordinance be improperly administered? It is impossible to estimate, but the experience of cities have demonstrated that infantle mortality can be greatly decreased by having pure milk. Rochester has furnished a striking example ofthis, and the report of the Bureau of Animal Industry made in 1907 presents such a strong array of facts on the same subject hat no one can question the imperative necessity of having pure milk. Without sufficient data, however, it would hardly be possible for any city to enact the kind of ordinance needed. The same holds true in regard to the smoke nuisance, the collection of garbage, paving, and all the other improvements and agencies which go to make city life enjoyable.

Take a concrete case. If some city were to make you a flattering offer to abate the smoke nuisance, or if it was your business to do this, what steps would you take and how would you begin? Would you just sit down and prepare an ideal plan whereby all the smoke would disappear instantly? On the contrary, would you not get together all the available data possible? You would make an effort to see what had been done by other communities for the same purpose, with what success these efforts had been met, where any defects might be improved, what appliances were in use, or in a word, you would try to learn just as much as possible before taking any step in the matter. If such an undertaking justifies you, as a business man, in gathering such information, how much more should it justify the city to see to it that no step is taken until all the facts possible bearing on the subject in question have been placed before those who have charge of it! As a purely business proposition, it seems that every city should have a reference bureau where such data could be kept on file. The expense of maintaining such a bureau is insignificant as compared with the savings which are possible.

Such a bureau of itself will not do away with the evils or abuses which exist, but it will furnish the means whereby such abuses can be lessened. It will supply the data, the knowledge, which is an essential to all good government. This material would be accessible to all who might care to use it, and civic associations especially would find it a valuable agency in securing needed reforms. With such a means open alike to officials and to the public, there would be provided a means for securing a more efficient expenditure of the public funds.

The Bureau of Municipal Research of New York City, a non-official body, has shown the need of light, and though it would not come within the province of the reference bureau to conduct such investigations as have been conducted by that Bureau, it would be a valuable agency for supplying such knowledge to those who desired it. Those of you who have read Dr. Allen's "Efficient Democracy" do not need to be told how essential it is to have efficient officials, but it is necessary for officials to have accurate knowledge before they can become efficient.

It may be said that the idea of the reference library has passed the experimental stage. New York and Wisconsin have maintained such libraries for their state legislatures for several years and with great success. The idea as applied to cities has also been put into operation in Baltimore and Milwaukee, and has been especially successful in Germany. An article in the Annals of the American Academy, May, 1908, gives a brief description of the work in Germany and the following quotation is taken from that article:

German Precedents

If the desired information requires a considerable amount of work a charge may be made by the director, otherwise the information is furnished without cost. It does not pretend to be able to answer every question that may be asked. In legal questions especially, it attemps only to refer to similar cases, if there have been such in other cities, or to point out the best material bearing on the subject. It is, however, in a position to furnish information on a host of questions likely to perplex the minds of city legislators. If an expression of opinion from other members of the Staedtetag is desired, the central bureau sends the question around and prepares the answer according to the reports received. This demand for information has two good effects. It may help the seeker over difficult problems and its makes it possible for the bureau to keep alive to the prevailing situation and to grow in depth and breadth of knowledge. In the first year of the bureau's existence, one hundred and thirty-two requests for information were made, and in forty per cent of these cases charges were made.

It should also be pointed out that the establishment of such bureaus might aid very materially in bringing about a uniformity in municipal accounting. Every investigation conducted, every effort made to get really comparable data from other cities, brings home to the investigator the great need for uniform accounting. Each bureau would endeavor to have a proper system of accounting installed and by collecting all the information on the subject, would put a strong weapon in the hands of those who advocated it. Just as uniform accounting would make it possible for accurate comparisons as between the several cities, so would the reference library make it possible for the city officials and legislators to use such comparisons and data.

In conclusion, we would say a few words about the Department of Legislative Reference of Baltimore. The Department has been in existence only since January 1, 1907, but there is at present on file there over 800 books and over 2500 pamphlets. In addition, numerous clippings as well as letters are kept on file. The material is classified according to subject matter, and several thousand cards furnish a guide to it. The material includes charters, ordinances, reports, books and articles on municipal questions, etc.

Baltimore's Library

Although a new departure in the way of municipal government, there has been a gradual increase in the requests for information. During this time several investigations have been made at the request of municipal officials, and the data collected have been submitted to those desiring the information. For the health department, we collected data in regard to the inspection of milk and dairies, and with the data thus collected an ordinance was drafted and passed by the city council. Besides getting copies of the ordinances and regulations in regard to milk inspection, a series of questions was submitted for the purpose of eliciting information in regard to the actual operation and administration of those ordinances. The health officers were also requested to make any criticisms which the administration of their ordinances had suggested. The health department also requested us to collect information in regard to the plumbing laws of other cities and the methods pursued for the removal of manure.

The tax commission appointed by Mayor Mahool made use of the department to secure information in regard to liquor license fees, and on the recommendation of this tax commission the fees were increased from $250 to $500 for this year, to $750 for the next year, and for the year 1910 and after, $1000. For this same commission a compilation was made showing the sales of Baltimore bonds since 1880, the price paid, etc., and information was secured as to the policy pursued by other cities in reference to the exemption from taxation of property engaged in manufacturing industries.

Among other subjects on which information was gathered at the request of officials, may be mentioned the following:

The policy pursued by other states in regard to receiving certain classes of indigent insane; whether city property was insured or should be insured by the city itself or by regular insurance companies; market licenses and fees; the collection and disposal of garbage; the duplication of street names; the tearing up of newly laid pavements for the purpose of laying gas mains, water pipes, etc.; how representatives in the several state legislatures are apportioned; licensing and muzzling of dogs; salaries of municipal officials; abolishment of grade crossings; the smoke nuisance; how plans for public buildings are adopted; pensions for school teachers and firemen; the use of school buildings for social, educational, and neighborhood purposes; inspection of electric meters; paving of private alleys; public comfort stations; taxation of street railways, and other subjects. There was also collected for members of the legislature information in regard to inheritance taxes, corrupt practices at elections, printing of bills, legislative expenses, public roads, railway rate regulation, public schools, gas and electric light rates, grain inspection, oyster laws, and several other topics. Individuals and improvement associations have frequently called upon the Department for information on a variety of subjects. No charge whatever is made for any information given.

One point should be especially emphasized, and that is, such libraries must be kept out of politics if they are to be of any value, for in the hands of politicians, they could be made to serve an evil purpose. Furthermore, the bureau should not advocate or oppose any measure, but simply supply the data and let the facts speak for themselves. The department in Baltimore is under the control of a commission composed of the mayor, the city solicitor, the president of the Johns Hopkins University, the president of the Municipal Art Society, and the president of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, thus removing it entirely from politics.